COACHES

Bill Davis: A new challenge at Savannah State

By CRAIG T. GREENLEE
Review Staff Writer

IN THE aftermath of several losing seasons, Savannah State put out an all-points bulletin for a football coach who could revive a defeat-ridden program.

Bill Davis, former head coach at South Carolina State, answered the call and appears to be breathing new life into the Fighting Tigers. A dose of new energy was essential. Prior to the '86 season, Savannah State had won six games in the past three years. But after the first four games this year, Davis had the Tigers at 2-2, equaling their '85 win total before mid-season. The Tigers were 2-9 last year.

"We're playing especially well on defense," Davis explains, "and our offense is beginning to turn the corner. They just have to settle down and get things going."

Davis is the rookie coach in the SIAC this year, but he is certainly no greenhorn as a head coach. He compiled a winning percentage of .671 while guiding the Bulldogs for seven seasons. A few MEAC league titles were won in the process.

Maybe, just maybe, folks in the Savannah area will remember Oct. 4 as a pivotal game that signaled a new era. The scene was Atlanta as Savannah State was guest for Morris Brown's homecoming. With the game tied at 7 and time running out, strong safety Mike Jones intercepted a Wolverine pass and ran it back 11 yards before getting out of bounds with one second left in the game. Calvin Tucker stepped in and booted a 53-yard field goal to win it 10-7.

The first-year Tiger coach was ecstatic. There couldn't have been more joy on the Savannah State sidelines if the Tigers had won a championship.

"The only thing I can compare this game to," Davis said with a wide-angle grin, "is last year's game, when South Carolina State beat Grambling (on ESPN) in almost the same manner. For our seniors who have lost a lot of games in the last minute, it has to be a very memorable victory. You couldn't draw it up (an ending) any better. I don't know if we can continue to win this way. But I'll take them any way we can get them, as long as they're w's. This type of win helps this team and gives our program a shot in the arm that's badly needed."

Davis' departure from South Carolina State was a bit bizarre. How can a school let a guy go who was 53-25-1? Granted, last year wasn't a vintage one (4-6-1); however, the Bulldogs had a schedule full of teams who were either ranked nationally in Division I-AA or made the playoffs.

Former South Carolina State Coach Bill Davis is bent on reviving Savannah State's football program. The result: The Tigers already are playing with more emotion than they have in recent years (photo by Craig T. Greenlee).

The former Bulldog mentor began to get the feeling he wasn't wanted when he was no longer permitted to run the program he had built. It was a slap in the face for a fellow who had molded a winning tradition. "I was the winningest coach in the school's history," he points out. "During my first five years, I had control. But afterwards, I didn't have much input and felt that my opinion wasn't respected. So I felt it was best to look elsewhere.

"However, I left with a good taste in my mouth for the school, athletes, administration and student body. I hated to leave because we had some very good years. But it came down to a personality thing between me and the chairman of the school's athletic committee."

With Davis knowing that he'd have control, Savannah State became an attractive alternative. The problem, though, was determining whether there was enough talent around to help the Tigers get rid of that losing image. At least the team should have a decent chance to be competitive, he thought.

Davis implemented his personal blueprint to help rally his new squad. For starters, a new, positive attitude had to be instilled, along with discipline and character, commodities that had been in short supply in recent years. "We tell our guys that they should play the game because they enjoy it," he says, "and not so much because they have scholarships. Having fun and playing with emotion will help us a great deal."

The goal for this year's Tigers is to break even. Considering past performances, finishing at .500 can be viewed as a major achievement.

"It will be a step in the right direction," Davis says. "But we'll have to be patient with our young players, and they have to be patient with the coaching staff. If we can go .500, then we'll see some light at the end of the tunnel. And even if we don't, there will still be some light at the end, because we're playing with more character."

Selling his players on his philosophy is one thing. Convincing supporters may be quite another. But that will change in time, Davis feels. "People like to look at success in terms of wins and losses. You can't continue to lose and expect people to believe in what you're trying to do."

Davis asserts that his Tigers are on target for five wins. They're playing a full 60 minutes of competitive ball, which, he says, is setting a solid foundation for a promising future at Savannah State. "I tell the players that, after they've graduated, they'll realize that they were on the team that started reversing things. Besides getting their degree, that's something I'd like for them to carry with them when they leave."

Being more familiar now with the caliber of competition in the SIAC, Davis feels there are teams in the conference that can compete favorably with teams in the other black-college conferences. The SIAC, he adds, has a rich football heritage, since many of the schools that are now in Division I-AA were SIAC members at one time. But the major difference is that the I-AA schools have more resources to get greater numbers of polished athletes when they recruit.

Recruiting will be somewhat different for Davis in Division II now that NCAA Bylaw 5-1-j (formerly known as Proposition 48) is in effect. Division I-AA schools (such as teams in SWAC and MEAC) must adhere to the same academic standards for freshman athletes that the Ohio States, UCLAs and Oklahomas do. For now, however, 5-1-j doesn't apply to Division II. The obvious result is that Division II schools will get some of those athletes who would ordinarily go to Division I, but didn't because they didn't score 700 on the SAT or 15 on the ACT.

Davis has felt all along that college board test scores aren't accurate predictors of academic accomplishment, pointing to several studies that say those tests are culturally biased.

The coach is all for academic standards, he says, but for black colleges, the major mission is to provide the opportunity for an education to those

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COMMENTARY

Proposal 48: Black schools scramble to survive

By ROSCOE NANCE
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PROPOSAL 48. It's one of the most discussed, and cussed, pieces of NCAA legislation ever passed.

Under its provisions, incoming freshman athletes must make at least 700 on the SAT or 15 on the ACT and have a 2.0 grade-point average in a core curriculum of high school courses. It is being hailed in many circles as the cure for college athletics' academic ailments.

But what it's really doing is killing the historically black schools in Division I. The numbers show that only 26 of 105 Division I schools have the services of all of their freshman football recruits this fall. In Division I-AA, 10.6 percent of all football signees are ineligible. Leading the way, not surprisingly, are the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, with almost 34 percent of its signees ineligible, and the Southwestern Athletic Conference, with 27 percent of its signees ineligible.

SWAC schools have a total of 50 ineligible signees, the most of any conference; MEAC schools lost 40 signees. Independents Florida A&M and Tennessee State lost seven and eight signees, respectively.

Above, Prairie View's Greg Montgomery tries to escape a Jackson State defender. Have Division I-AA wealth and prestige escaped the grasp of black schools? Left, Jackson State's W.C. Gorden: The best bet for survival may be Division II (photos by Mark Gail).

Those numbers don't reflect the athletes who were not even recruited in the first place because they lacked the core curriculum courses.

"It was tough enough to recruit against the larger schools without having to compete for the best students and athletes at the same time," said Jackson State football Coach W.C. Gorden.

If black schools remain in Division I, they're going to find it impossible to recruit against the larger schools. They'll find themselves playing against a stacked deck.

Proposal 48 is shrinking the size of the talent pool. The larger schools are able to work both sides of the street. They recruit the best athletes – black and white. Black schools are only able to recruit black athletes – and can't get the time of day from some of them.

"So many kids who make 15 (on the ACT) are not athletes," said Mississippi Valley Athletic Director Chuck Prophet.

The larger schools, the ones we see on television and in bowl games all the time, will get all of the top athletes who qualify under Proposal 48. Those blue-chippers who don't qualify will end up at some hand-picked junior college for a couple of years, or some "sugar daddy" will pay for their first year while they sit out and retain four years of eligibility.

If those alternatives don't pan out, the larger schools can afford to give an athlete who doesn't qualify a scholarship and have him sit out for a year and retain three years of eligibility.

Black schools have none of those luxuries.

"We're already in the red," said Gorden. "If we had athletes sitting out, we'd be in the red red."

Said Ken Free, commissioner of the MEAC: "When those underprivileged kids come to us, they can't pay their way. But they can pay their way when they go to other places. That's always been puzzling to me."

Black schools' main problem with Proposal 48 is the test score requirement. It has been documented that blacks score lower than whites on the SAT and the ACT and that the tests discriminate against the poor and minorities. They've thrown that argument in the NCAA's face hundreds of times without any tangible relief.

"A kid coming from Itta Bena (Miss.) ... things are on that test that he's never heard of," said Prophet. "He could live to be 90 and never hear of them. It's like when they said you could vote but you had to interpret a part of the Constitution."

The NCAA did relent and institute a sliding scale that allows a higher SAT or ACT score or grade-point average to

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